

[Dennis Potinos]

26070

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Dennis Potinos (Greek)

Proprietor.

Rectors's Cafe,

Cathedral Place,

St. Augustine, Florida.

Rose Shepherd, Writer.

DENNIS POTINOS, (GREEK) Part I

It was four o'clock on a hot Sunday afternoon, when the polite cashier of Rector's Cafe in aristocratic Cathedral Place smilingly stated that Mr. Dennis Potinos, head of the Greek Community in St. Augustine, and proprietor of Rector's Cafe, had stepped out for a short time.

"He'll be back by five — always here by that time, if you return."

At 5 p.m. the residents of St. Augustine, the transient visitors to the old Catholic Cathedral next door — the oldest institution of its kind in the oldest city of the United States — historic St. Augustine, were filing into Rector's for their evening meal.

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Rector's Cafe specializes in shrimp, fish, oysters, — the business card states — “The Original Seafood Platters — Cooked to the King's Taste.”

Mr. Potinos arose from a small table at the rear of the restaurant where he had been enjoying a cigarette and a cup of black coffee, and came forward, extending his hand — a lame hand from a stiff arm, hanging almost limp from a low shoulder — and said cordially — ‘We sit here at this front table, by the window.’

As if by magic, three cups of coffee appeared, and a large ashtray was placed at Mr. Potinos' left hand, with a package of imported, fragrant cigarettes.

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A system of air condition makes the restaurant especially inviting after driving around for an hour on the broiling streets, with little or no breeze during the waning afternoon.

Everything was spotless. The tables — sixty of them — were spread with long white cloths with attractive Persian — gourd-shaped — patterns in brilliant colors of red and green, shaded into soft henna and yellow. The top clothe, removed after each diner, were stiffened white linen.

There was no noise. The Greek waiters in Tuxedos glided in and out among the tables, listening quietly, and writing rapidly, when an order was given. There was no odor of food cooking, and no/ sickening smell of smothered burning of shrimp hulls, as was the case a little further down the street in the same block, where cold drinks had been ordered in an effort to combat the heat.

The walls were wainscoted up six feet with embossed imitation Spanish-looking leather wallpaper; above that a double white tile-like border, then the soft green tinted walls to the lofty ceiling. The floor was of small hexagon-shaped block tile, laid in an intricate pattern in brown and white. The chairs were heavy, dark brown, Spanish type, and the cashier's

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desk of brown walnut with high brass grille. Everywhere an air of repose, elegance, and refinement.

In front of us, facing the long plate glass window, was a remarkable collection of coral from Florida waters — the feathery fans, the tall, sprangled “trees — some pink, some white — and at the end of the ornate basin — the setting for native ferns, was a long shark's jaw with polished, murderous teeth.

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“Where did I get the attractive tablecloths? Chicago. A year in November now, it will be, and many, many times they have gone to the laundry, but still like new.”

A rather [?] [?], he is dressed in a light weight gray suite, with shirt of two colors of blue stripes, a soft collar with black string tie, and presents a most dignified appearance with his quiet bearing, his dreamy, enlongated gray eyes, his hair black and slightly graying, parted in the middle.

“You want my story? It will be long — very long. I was born on the Island of [Ithaca?]. On the map? Here it is, to the West of Greece, proper, in the Adriatic between Greece and Italy. It is spelled just the same as [Ithaca?], in New York state. The town of my people where I was born is the seaport, Baphia. The town has a normal population of 6,000, the whole island, 16,000.

“The climate is not tropical, it is about like that of North Georgia. There are high mountains all about, and in the winter are heavy snows.

“There are many beautiful flowers and olive trees, and on the mountain sides great vineyards, all kinds of grapes.”

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Mr. Potinos speaks with a well modulated voice. He slurs his [ʔ]'s, lengthens his i's. and [ʔ] to the long words by stringing out the syllables, continental fashion. His accent is decidedly French, which he speaks fluently.

“There are no large farms there, as here — just gardens like, where the farmers raise plenty of vegetables.

“The harbor of Baphia, where I was born, lies in a valley.

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“It is quite low, surrounded by mountains all around. The groves of olive trees and the vineyards are many and the pressed-out olive oil and the wine makes the income of more than half the inhabitants.” (He pronounced it “inhob'-ee -t-a-h=n=t=s”)”

“The harbor of Baphia is so picturesque and so beautiful! As you come into the harbor front, you sail between two mountains, and as you sail up towards the city, you see nothing — nothing but the mountains on the side, and the sky, and the blue water. After you enter the bay in which the harbor is of the town of Baphia, the mountains rise in steps and tiers which lead down to the valley. If you look around from the ship,”-(he pronounced it “she-ep”) “You seem lost like, you do not recognize the way you come in. The harbor is very deep and big liners come regularly, and freighters from all over the world.

“Between the island and the mainland contact is principally by small sailing vessels, owned and operated by Greeks, bringing over groceries, yard goods, and other supplies. Also there are extensive mail connections from the continent, and to all the islands.

“To take the ocean-going vessels, it is necessary to catch a steamer from Baphia to Patras, on the pelioponissus. They have not yet airplane service, but probably will later, as they are very progressive.

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“The sustenance (living) of the people is from the visitors to the island from outside of Greece and from the workmen — the main industry is ship-building — and from the sailors on the liners and freighters.

“For instance, the inhabitants of Greece own about fifty ocean-going steamers, mastered- (manned)- “ninety percent by residents of Ithaca from the master (captain) down to the ordinary seaman, dockmen and leaders.

“Many visitors come to the Island of Ithaca in ships from South Africa, the British possessions of India, Egypt, Australia, and from Americas, South America, from Roumania, also from Russia. The money they leave goes to the people who live and work there.

“The island ships olive oil and wine to ports all over [?] and other countries where it is in demand.

“Russia, before the Bolshevic dominance, and the overthrow of the Orthodox Church of the old country, used oil from out part of Greece for illumination of the churches and in their homes.

“The people look for money a greatdeal from the visitors, the same as Florida caters to winter tourists.

“Ithaca is also historic. While I still lived there many archeological excavations had been made; expeditions and scientists coming from various parts of the world, to study the scenes that were referred to in Homer — for instance, the home of Ulysses, and the parts pertaining to his life in Ithaca.

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“Mr. Frederick S. Schlemann, the archeologist, excavated the site of Troy, and wrote a letter certifying that Troy, the Illiad, and the Odyssus, were not a myth — as so many

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believed — but were absolutely true, as things then existed in early Greece, written about and described with so much detail in the classics.

“The public schools of Greece at present time are three: the primary, the elementary, and the high schools. Business and commercial colleges they have there also.

“In Athens —(he pronounced it “Ahthe-e-ns”) is the National University of Greece, and there is another very fine University in Salonika.

“The northern part of Greece is very mountainous, and there exist in the valleys many small settlements. There are three ports/ on the mainland which are nearer to the inhabitants of these settlements, than is the main harbor of the Island — (Baphia).

“In some sections of Greece [rosin?] is added to the wine, the sour wine, mostly as a preservative.

“The wine of the Island of Ithaca is dry, like champagne, very clear, and I am sorry to say almost none of it is ordered or shipped to America.

“The olive oil is the ‘[Maorodaphne?].’ It is wonderful, very fine grain, and in cool weather it becomes thick like soft butter. In the old country it is kept in ancient stone urns of fifty gallons capacity.

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“In Ithaca, I am thankful to say, electric lights have been installed by one of our [pahtrioots?] (patriots) - a very rich ship owner. His main office is in London, England.

“Ithaca, by the way has produced more patriots /(public spirited citizens) than perhaps of any other section, who have been spending their money for the national expression of Greece.” (That is, that Greece might take her place among the nations of the world as a modern, up-to-date country).

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"Ithaca during the war of the Revolution — 1821 to 1829 — the time when the Island was under the English flag, became the home of the refugees from Greece. The hordes come down, swarming over the country like savages, and the people had to leave their pursuits and possessions and flee for their lives. Ithaca and the other islands helped to house, caring for them also with money, provisions, and clothing, — all necessities.

"During the Igio Messcalanto, was the time Lord Byron was helping the poor sick children, who were victims of the siege. Lord Byron visited Italy, staying there for some, when he was entertained in the larger cities.

"Ithaca is a part of the Ionia Islands, ceded to Great Britian after Napoleon's death, and it stayed under British rule until 1864 or 1865 when England donated the Islands to become a part of Greece by the demand of the inhabitants and the new Price of Denmark, King George I, who ruled Greece.

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"In the [Ionia?] Islands the pure Greek language is always spoken. The islands have been blessed by God — never conquered by the Ottoman rule. While Turks occupied the Balkans and north as far as Vienna, Austria never were they able to take the islands, even [?] under the Duke of Vienna, who had a mighty power at sea — God protected the islands.

"The present dictator of Greece, General Motaxis, was born in Ithaca. Just lately I read in a Greek newspaper that he had asked Greek educator (professor) to write the history of the Ionia islands from prehistoric times, and, believe me, I am eagerly waiting for its publication.

"There are many churches in the Islands, all of the Orthodox Greek, and all under the administration of one Greek Bishop.

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"The unit of money is the [drachma?], value and like the French franc, about five cents in American money. But there is so much shipping that we reckon weight in ounces, pounds, bushels, the same as in England or America. It is different in continental Greece.

"I came to the United States twenty-eight years ago, in 1911. I went first to Georgia, living for years in Waycross, and eleven years in [Blackshear?], Georgia.

"I was in business in Blackshear all my years there. I owned a restaurant there and a fruit store. I was rated in both Dun's and Bradstreet's Commercial Register. Then I sold my business at a nice profit and came to Florida in 1925.

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"I bought this restaurant and have been here ever since. The man before me gave it the name of Rector's, and I just continued under that name. It was a very small place when I took it over. I have enlarged the capacity, improved the service, extended the menu, until now the cafe has a national reputation. I am proud to say, most proud, that Rector's is recognized as one of the best restaurants in Florida. I specialize in seafoods."

Returning again in thought to his beloved Island of Ithaca, he continued:

"No cold storage there. Meat was only available once or twice a week, fresh killed, but every day there was fine fresh fish. The fishing boats went out in the morning and returned at night, when the people went down to the market places and selected their fish — fresh from the salt waters and most times alive yet.

"There were no cows on the island. The milk used came from goats. They thrived on the hillsides on the mountains grass of the rocky soil, and their milk is good and rich, free from tuberculosis germs.

"Once someone brought in about a hundred cattle, but they were kept, as you say, in a pen fattening until ready to kill.

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“The beef for consumption of the islands came from the sections north of Greece, especially the Epirus. It was from here that the cattle were brought in and fattened like I say. There is some pork on the island, but very little, as the people generally do not like pork, and do not eat it. They consider a pig a dirty animal, not fit as food.

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“In the spring, in fact most of the year, they have lambs, and in the summer the young kids. Easter week everybody buys a lamb and barbecues it. Most of them are cooked at home. A good many, like two families who are good neighbors, barbecue together. The homes have brick, built-in ovens, with a part they build a fire under like a furnace with a grate, and this is where they barbecue.

“When I lived there, only earthen vessels were used to cook in, with occasionally a cooker of tin coated with copper.

“There were tinsmiths — troubadours (traveling potmenders) — who came down from Epirus. They have been coming each year since the Middle Ages, traveling in Greece in the winter time when it is cold in their own country, carrying small furnace-pots fired with charcoal, retinning the copper vessels for the inhabitants. I will say everything cooked in these containers is fine, very fine.

“The housewives roast their own coffee, and grind it /by hand in small mills, held between their knees. The mill can be screwed to grind fine or coarse, and they say the best to do this work is the troubadours ([?]) who have strong hands and arms, and can grind the coffee fine. They also climb up and pick the olives from the trees, help with all kinds of work, but how they do steal! They are terrible thieves.

“My grandmother had a loom, great big, that took up the whole side of one room — about eight feet square, and she would get the wool, when my grandfather sheared the sheep, 11 and washed and washed until the wool was white as snow. Then it was wrung out and

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dried in cotton bags in the sun. It would be light then, and a small quantity of wet wool made a big bag of fluffy dry wool.

“Then she had a hand machine - a carder - that made the wools in little rolls, which she would stretch out and spin into thread. Sometimes she would stretch too much and the thread would break. Then she would take the two ends, wrap them together and twist hard, and you could not break such a thread by hard pulling.

“She would buy big spools of cotton thread from the village store and spin that also in to fine cotton cloth. It wear most like iron.

“In my days there was no ready-made or manufactured clothing on the island. In every neighborhood there was a woman dressmaker. These ladies, to my mind, were artists. They could take goods by the yard and fashion the most beautiful things. They made ladies' dresses from looking at pictures. In times when a girl in the neighborhood would be getting married, and had a big trousseau, and lots of maids taking part with the bride, the dressmaker was most busy, as there would be lots and lots of new dresses for the wedding party.

“The men's clothes was made by men tailors. Those who could afford to have the tailor-made clothing were very fortunate, as the tailors were artists, too, training in Athens and Patras, and some of them going to European centers and to London to study the styles and cutting.

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“The shoes for both men and women were made in local shoe shops by trained shoemakers who had a special cutter, who cut to measure, had a [mechanic?] to sew and put the shoes together. The shoes, as a rule, were very beautiful and lasting. Kidskin was used for the women's shoes and cowskin and calfskin for the men's. The best leather was imported. Some places in continental Greece had leather manufacturing places.

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"Ithaca has always been a maritime country. The Harbor of Euphia has been know for centuries, and there for centuries have existed ship-building yards, building sea-worthy ships. For instance, sailing vessels, plying the Mediterranean [sea?] from ports on the Black Sea to the [straits?] of Gibraltar, were built in Ithaca.

"Ithaca has produced many good businessman, with large interests in Russia, Egypt, [Asia Minor?], [Austria?] [/?] [Hungary?]. Also [there have been many?] famous scholars and educators (teachers) who have good positions in schools and collages all over the world, some of them [renowned?] for their great [learning?] and their contributions to literature and the arts and sciences.

"In my home in Ithaca the primary school children went together, but the grammar school from the fifth grade and the [high?] schools were [separated?], the boys having their own rooms and teachers and the girls on the other side. But in the same building. There were both men and women teachers, the women in the lower grades.

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"I would like to mention some of the Grecian ship-building companies in England, one is [Stathatos?] Brothers and the other is Dracoulis, Ltd. These are two of the older and better known firms, with [immense?] capital and large enterprises. There are others, too, that have come into existence since I left Greece thirty years ago, that have offices in London.

"One family of Ithaca, the Theophilatos, were one of the pioneer ship-builders and owners that made great marine progress when Greece first started to become a maritime nation. But that company is now out of existence, because during the World War the oldest stockholder of this company, Demetrios Theophilatos, was forced to leave England on account of his anti-King activities. England wanted a united nation.

"Demetrios theophilatos came to New york, bringing his fortune to this country. He lost his ships because the English Empire were fighting him.

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"In my opinion, Demetrios Theophilatos was the greatest patriot of Modern Greece, but he made the mistake of trying to fight the Great British nation, and not on the field of honor!

"Sorry to say, after he came to this country, he lost all his money in real estate in New York city.

"But Mr. Theophilatos was a nobleman. He was recognized by President and Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, was invited to be their guest in Washington, and was a friend of Mayor [Hylan?], of New York City.

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"All of Ithaca regretted that he lost his money, because he was one of the island's most highly regarded citizen.

"When he got cleaned out of his fortune in the United States, he went back, not to England, but to Holland, where in Rotterdam he is earning a nice living as a ship broker.

"Those steamship companies now in London conduct their business from ships flying the Greek flag, enjoy the respect of the English, and the confidence of Lloyds, the great insurers. During all the civil war in Spain, never once did they carry a cargo to any of the belligerents or handle any shipping but to or for the British government.

"There are forty or fifty ocean-going vessels owned by sons of Ithaca and operated for their fathers in Patras and Athens, Greece. But for all these ships, the name of their port of berth is Baphia on the Island of Ithaca."

At this time, Mr Potinos, who had been talking without interruption, produced a letter from his desk from the captain of a Greek Steamer — the S. S. [Eloni Stathatos?] — a native of Ithaca, a friend whose wife is a near relative, written while the ship was unloading scrap-iron in [Yokohoma?], Japan. Mr Potinos saw in a notice in a Greek paper that the ship would touch at Key West for orders July 1st, and the letter was in answer to one he had

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written the Captain, and delivered to him when the ship reached Key West as a port-of-call on the date mentioned. He read the letter, written on a typewriter and [ouched?] in the most beautiful English, which he stated he would answer in time for his friend to receive it five days hence at Seattle, Washington 15 and would turn over to the Federal Writers' Project for the valuable information it contains. [?] Mr. Potinos was shown the picture-supplement illustration of the wedding party of wrestling "Adonis". Jim Londos, of Beverly Hills, California, and his bride, Miss [Mrva Rochwite?], of St. Louis, Missouri, as they were led around the alter of the Greek Orthodox Church by the Rev. Constantine Thapralis, in the California city, and was asked to kindly explain the flower [crows?] worn by the bride and groom.

"I do not know if I can remember, but a song is part of the service, glorifying virtue and honor — it goes — ""May glory and virtue crown these"" and the two ribbons tie the flower crowns together, to indicated the couple are united. I will write to the minister myself of the Greek Orthodox Church in Atlanta, and ask him to send me the entire hymn."

In answer to a direct question he said: "Not many Greeks are farming in this country. The could not, because, in my opinion, they were so depressed when they came over here, most of them, that they had to turn their hands to labor or other quick work to earn money to live on, and did not have time or capital to develop a farm. If they would turn to farming. I am sure they would make good, because [as a race?] they are very persistent and hard-working. Some come over trained in various trades as mechanics, — brick-layers, stonemiths, plasters — as blacksmiths, painters, etc. But they had labored for so little at such work in 16 Greece, there is so little putting up of new building, that they almost starved to death, and they did not have the heart to try to continue their trained [?] occupations in a new country, although wonderful skilled workers, for fear they would be out-of-date or slow, and it would work a hardship on them. You see, the main thing was to earn money quickly, just enough to live on, day by day.

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“America is a wonderful place for my people, wonderful, wonderful country! In which to earn a living, the government by a free people, the things we have (conveniences), and the necessities of live — all so incomparable to what they are in Greece. We won't speak of it, but it would be surprising if we could get along were we to return to the homeland. To live there the life we have in this country, we would have to be one hundred percent in every respect, and indeed be very rich to have there the same conveniences as are possible in this country.” (to be continued)